

2009

Design By Accident

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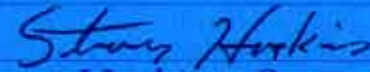
Design By Accident
visualizing the art of happenstance

Mengfu Zhang
2009


Signature



John Malinoski, Primary Advisor
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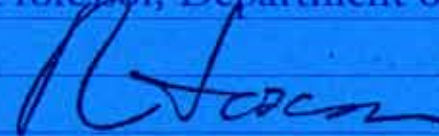
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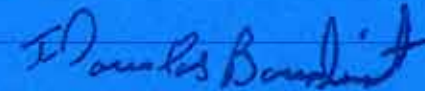
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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following people who have contributed and shared inspirations: John Malinoski, Steven Hoskins, Ramana Pidaparti, Rob Carter, Roy Mckelvey, Sandy Wheeler, John Demao, Matt Woolman, So Hee Kwon, Jason Dilworth, Alex Egner, Jillian Columbus Sanford, Allison Schumacher, Peter Bain, Carissa Henriques, Feifei Fan, Hyejin Park, Min Wang, Amy Gender, Dmitry Krasny, Henk van Assen.

I would like to give special thanks to my Mom Ms. Shaoling Liu, my Dad Mr. Yubo Zhang. Because of your love, I am eventually getting there. I would also like to express my thanks to my boyfriend Xing Hong, my roommate Yunwen Su, and my best friends Xiaoliang Liang, Eric Yang, Yinnuo Jin and Renyan Liu. I appreciate your giving me help whenever I needed it.

It is all of you who have made this project possible.

— Mengfu Zhang

Table of Contents

12	Abstract
14	Problem Statement
16	Introduction
20	Process and Methodology
76	Conclusion
83	Bibliography

Accident is a metaphor for life. From an arbitrary point in time, we potentially preview the entirety of existence.

Abstract

There is a Chinese idiom called “ blessing or bane,” which implies that a misfortune may perhaps soon turn into a blessing. Focusing on accident as a design method implies making the best out of a bad situation. An accident reveals invisible circumstances and potentialities in the world, both familiar and unfamiliar. Looking into the unpredictable world, I can begin to release my control, take a breath, and see what might happen if I do not fight the situation. I am able to get out of my own way, and see what the work’s destiny will be. This sets up a context in which there are no faults, no mistakes, and no accidents — everything may contribute to a solution.

Primitive humans first realized fire could be used for cooking only after it destroyed their homeland and burned their animals in the process.

Problem Statement

Despite the loss that often results from an accident, the experience offers an opportunity for learning and insight. Having been made aware of a tragedy and having to search for ways of preventing its reoccurrence in the future, we are forced to reassess the situation that we are living in. Accidents can shake us out of complacency and cause us to consider the very nature of existence. In being surprised or shocked by the instantaneous experience of new information that results from an accident, we find our attention immediately focused and our senses heightened. The experience of an accident is instantly memorable. Witnesses of accidents are immersed in a negative situation, but one where their help and involvement is most needed. An accident questions our social consciousness and demands unique approaches to problem solving.

Accidents in design also produce immediate and memorable information, encouraging a heightened encounter with the resulting information. According to Chaos Theory, a seemingly small and insignificant event has the potential to trigger a chain reaction and to change a whole system. The effects of an accident within a design process can be unpredictably far-reaching, resulting in a completely unplanned outcome.

My intention in this creative project is to create things that are beyond my control, to seek outcomes that are beyond my expectation, and which are also beyond who I am. I am interested in challenging linear and stereotypical approaches to solving problems. Considering accidents in a visual way, I am going to create a space to allow them to happen in a variety of ways. I have defined accident in design as a method that creates unintentional results, and provides a way to encourage unpredictable elements to take center-stage in the creative process. By considering this method's positive role in the creative process, it can be developed into a design system to incite the unexpected. The system serves as a portal to encourage both the unpredictable and the accidental. It enables us to step away from our limited ways of looking, thinking and making. By partially removing ourselves from the creative process, we can allow an accidental design approach to establish the trajectory of a design solution and to determine its ultimate realization.

I try to remember when I first realized that life offers no guarantees. Maybe this happened after my grandfather died of a heart attack when I was ten. He passed very peacefully, leaving the idea of death quietly in front of me. Life had to continue.

Introductions

During the past year, my homeland of China has experienced an extremely tough time: a major earthquake, a devastating train crash, terrorism in Tibet, the economic crisis, severe snowstorms and fires. When people are suffering and are in pain, I feel helpless. The fundamental question I ask myself is, “How is design going to help?” More specifically, “What can visual communication design communicate to make a difference?” and “How can the message be best conveyed?”

I began to explore ways to document the events in which people were losing their power, as well as their sense of life. In May 2008, as a witness of the Sichuan earthquake, I was surrounded by an increasing number of daily injury reports. I looked for a simple, immediate and visual ways to amplify people’s consciousness of the disaster. This motivated me to research not only ways of documenting the natural spectacle caused by a disaster, but also to record people’s perceptions of the event. To communicate with those unfamiliar or untouched by such a catastrophic tragedy, I believed a visual language representing the concept of accident was appropriate.

I chose to translate the experience of accident into a method incorporating accident into the process of design. When the design process embraces the mistakes, errors, failures and imperfections that negatively impact life, it unexpectedly builds a connection between people’s knowledge of normal life and their awareness of the accident.

People learn from reality. Instead of avoiding or hiding the unexpected, accidental design amplifies those accidental moments visually. When a revealed spot is enlarged, it encourages a clash between the spectator and the spectacle. People’s conventional linear and continuous observations are suddenly interrupted and they are able to reach somewhere far beyond their original perspective. Every spectacle we witness has two entrances, one at the front and one at the back. My intent is to attract spectators to enter from the back door, where they can struggle with the negative; fight for the reality; review and reconsider; and be critical and political. Afterwards, they can walk out of the front door with a new perspective, more aware of the positive nature of accidents. The design by accident method recognizes that when negative circumstances happen, an opportunity still exists for a positive outcome.

In graphic design, we all share the experience of “something going wrong” like a computer crash, mistakes at the photocopier, or a printer that spits out errors. When we are disturbed by the elements of unpredictability and uncertainty, we may not think of the beneficial aspect of the accident. In order to invoke an understanding of accidents, my creative process began by making a visual accidents occur — recreating and repeating the process of an accident and recording those fragmented moments frozen in time. I intentionally suspended judgment during this process. The design result — the end product of this process—may be unintentional and even be pre-determined to be so. The resulting random forms, emerging patterns, and chaotic compositions that result are preserved as a record of the process that reveals the previously invisible identity of the media in use.

I intentionally use the strategies to make visible each accidental phenomena whether it is natural or man-made and to force viewers to construct their reality. However, such intentions are nonlinear and even I cannot predict what my outcomes will be. The conclusion is open, multivariate, and deconstructed by an uncontrollable progression.

It's difficult to describe what such an irrational nonlinear creative process is like; rather than make an accident occur, let it go, watch and think.

As a visual communicator, I have been educated as a problem solver. I have even been asked: “Can design change the world?” I have a belief that it can make changes, but maybe only after bad things have happened.



Process + Methodology

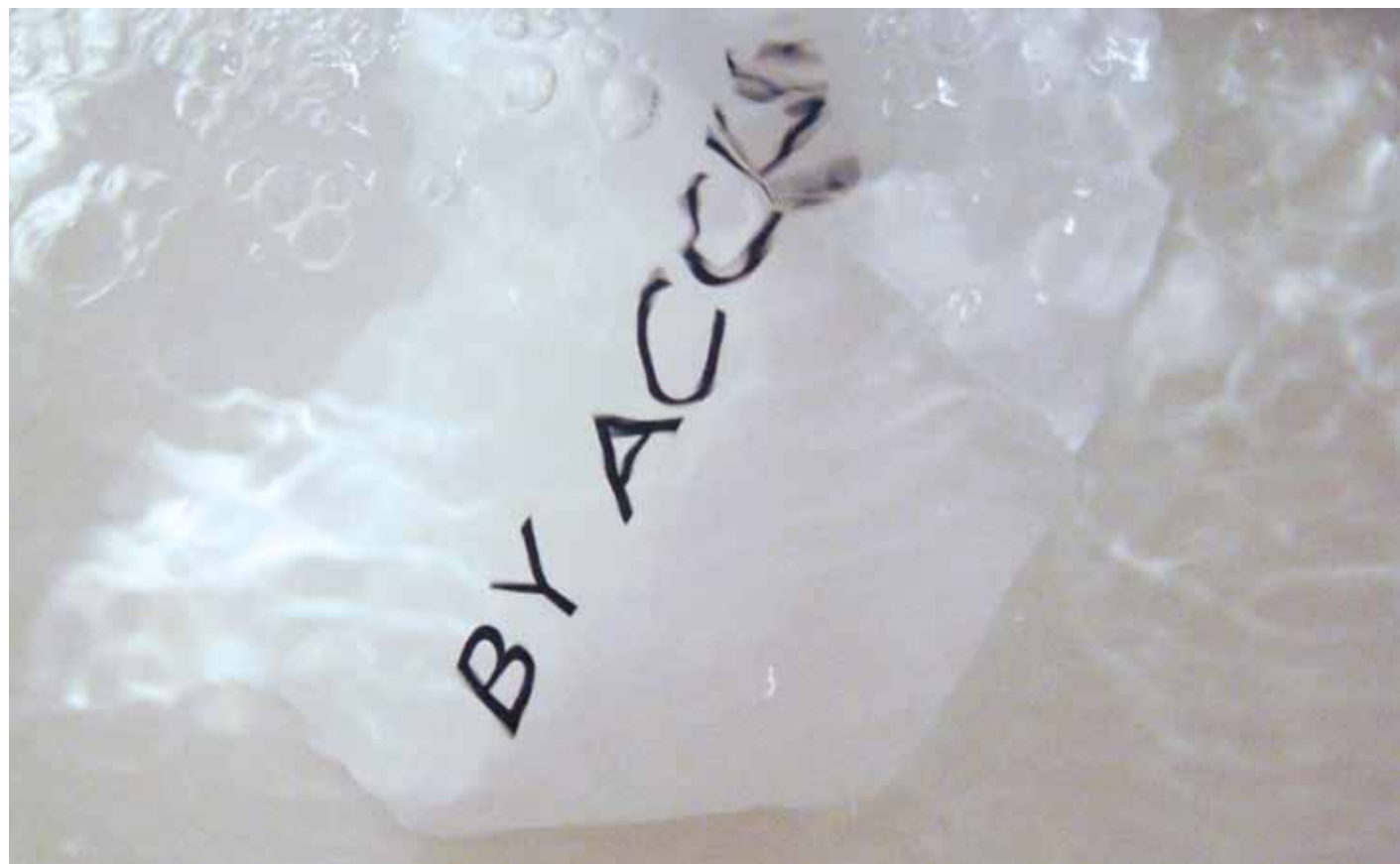
Experimenting with various materials and media, my creative project attempts to enact various stages of accidents. In order to produce my own reaction to the accidents, I essentially step backward, inverting my typical status as a problem solver, and transforming myself into a problem producer — or a total troublemaker. The process results in a series of rebirths of an accident, in which the physical sufferings and the mental distresses become an inspiration of everything that follows.

I first became conscious of the possibilities of accidents after witnessing a car crash on my way to school. It was a Tuesday morning in March 2008.



The very sound of the crashing, along with the image of the physical disfigurement that formed within a second, immediately attracted my attention. Looking at the results, I found masses of new beauty, born under unusual circumstances. Their appeal existed within details. Compared with the original design by Ford or Chevrolet, the new body shapes of the vehicles derived from the accident and were more organic, dynamic, sharp and impressive. I realized that such a unique landscape can only be produced by accident, never by human intent. At the beginning of my project, the term “accident” was for me as abstract as “minimal” or “interactive” — design ideas we often play upon, and even stylize.

In order to engage more physically with the effects of accidents, I introduced entropy and chaos into my creative process. In the accompanying images, I printed out copies of the words “By Accident” on a regular white paper and set them on different journeys. One was dipped into water, then dried and crinkled. The others were burned, pasted on, pasted off, folded, scanned, and photographed. Eventually, every piece reached a particular destination. In each destination, the typefaces affected by various physical effects, produced a visual narrative, representing “By Accident.” Such literal interpretations aided me in expressing the idea of “accident” stylistically. The unpredictable patterns created a unique visual language.

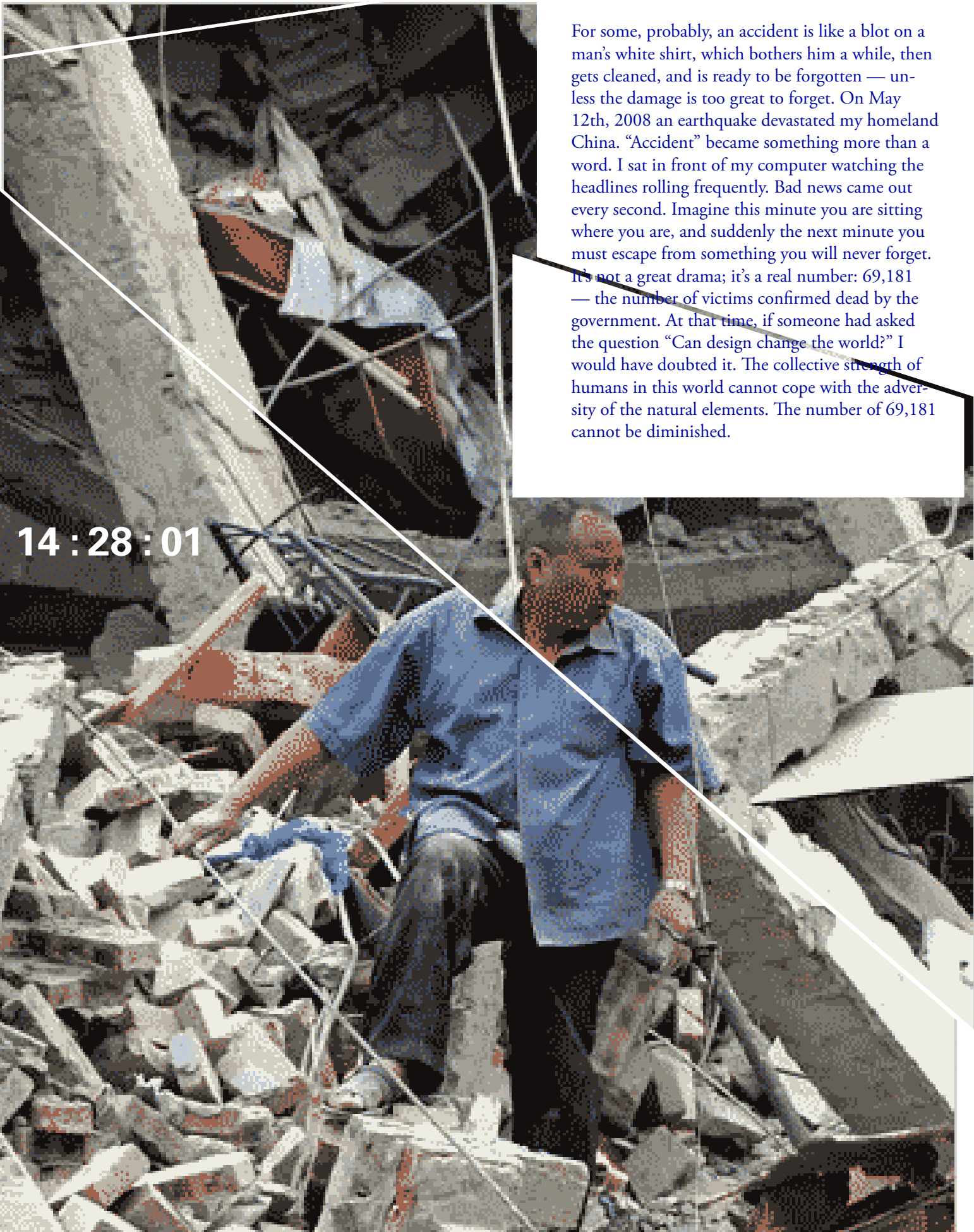


Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

— Leo Tolstoy “Anna Karenina”

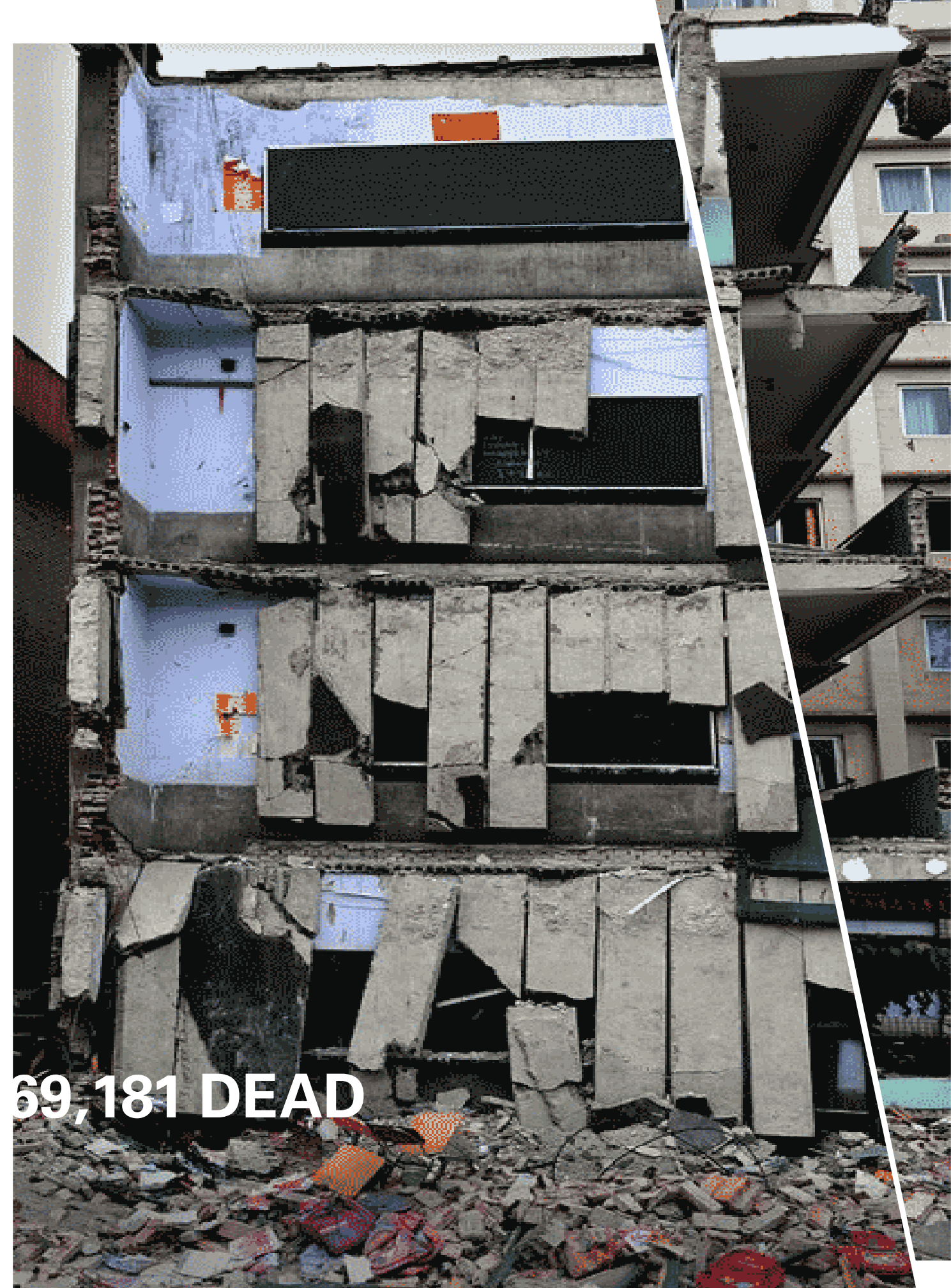
May 12, 2008





14:28:01

For some, probably, an accident is like a blot on a man's white shirt, which bothers him a while, then gets cleaned, and is ready to be forgotten — unless the damage is too great to forget. On May 12th, 2008 an earthquake devastated my homeland China. "Accident" became something more than a word. I sat in front of my computer watching the headlines rolling frequently. Bad news came out every second. Imagine this minute you are sitting where you are, and suddenly the next minute you must escape from something you will never forget. It's not a great drama; it's a real number: 69,181 — the number of victims confirmed dead by the government. At that time, if someone had asked the question "Can design change the world?" I would have doubted it. The collective strength of humans in this world cannot cope with the adversity of the natural elements. The number of 69,181 cannot be diminished.



69,181 DEAD

374,176 INJURED







On the contrary, it is easy to raise people in kindness when a tragedy happens. People's compassion is naturally stimulated, while looking at the photographs from the accident scene, and considering that these unfortunate beings are our own parents or kids. When an accident happens, we may see it is as similar to what has happened before. Do we hope that it may never occur again? My visual exploration is not about searching for the answer, but to evoke more questions about the event.



My first step of documenting the event of an earthquake is to build a bridge between the evidence and people’s sensory perceptions. In my opinion, the way one perceives an accident is concerned with the way he or she is going to restore the damage afterwards.

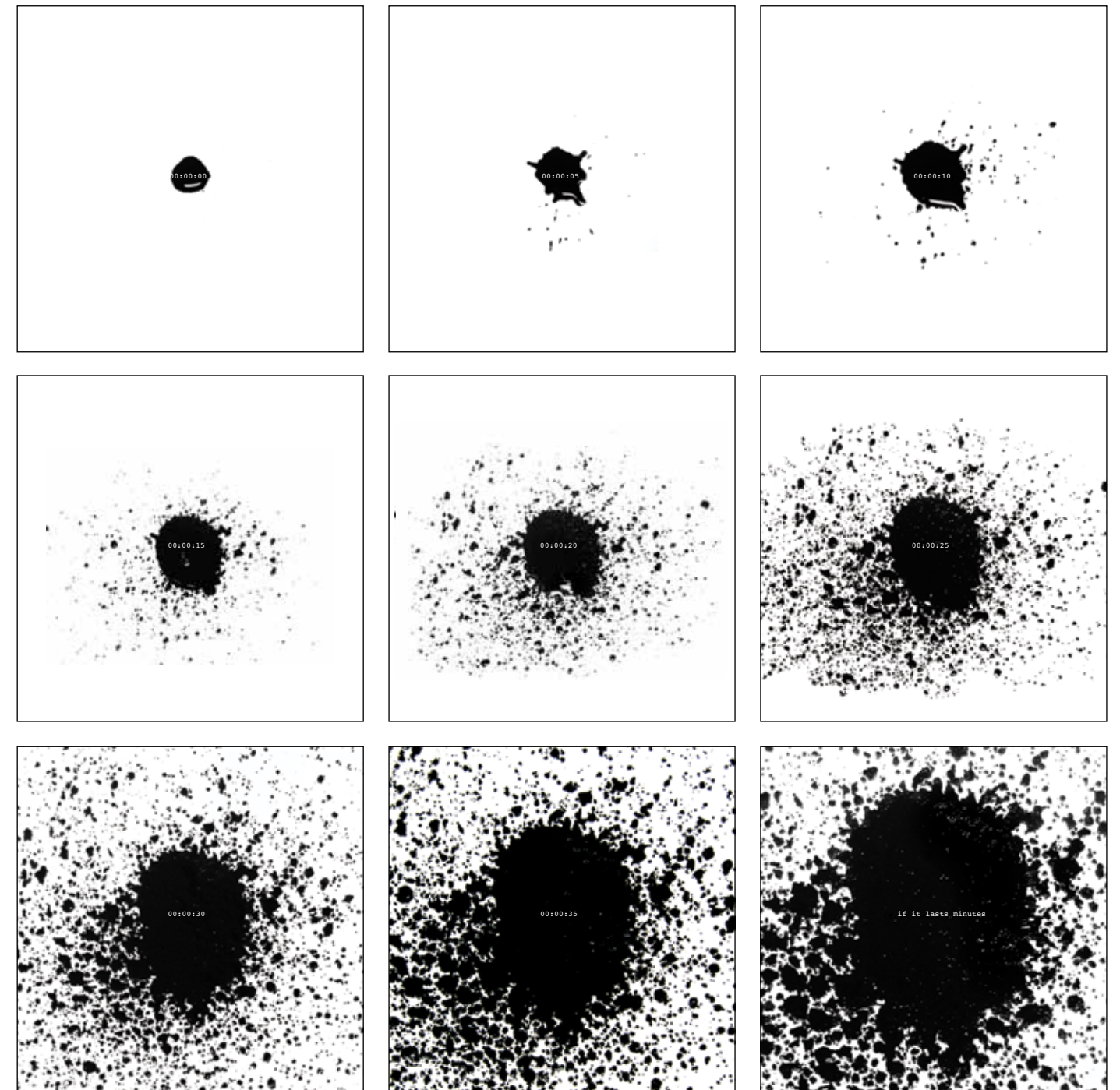
By encouraging people to find familiarity when encountering an accident, I use incidental scenes and forms from daily life that most people immediately recognize such as water stains, ink smudges or cracker crumbs. I then stylize these images and preserve them, making them permanent. In doing this, a “familiar-strange” image is produced. When encountering the information contained in these images, I expect audiences to be able to retrace and recall their associated — and possibly fragmented — memories of accidents they have encountered in the past. I am not trying to convince people to react in specific ways, but to invite them to incorporate their own personal experiences when reading the imagery. There is no right answer or response to an accident, but it is worth searching for one when an accident happens.

I am curious that how people retrace the past. I think of memory as a dictionary; fragments are preserved as words, collected in the book; until one day, we try to recall something, we just open it and look it up. To create an “earthquake dictionary,” I collected the words used to report the earthquake in daily news. I then categorized them as verbs, adjectives, or nouns, and whether they had to do with nature, individual human beings or groups. Finally, I manipulated each word typographically and in combination with photographs.

			
<i>verb</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>adjective</i>	<i>noun</i>
shake press crack break extrud immerse concrete clashhit injure imbed	cry lose love survive die move help scare despond impress restore reconstruct request pray	sad homeless hurt injured brave unforgettable nervous shy desperate selfish unselfish	time hope faith space homeland childhood environment confidence shelter history succor

I believe the aim of communication is not only about information, but also about a heightened appreciation of people's sensory experience.

The first word I chose from the news reports was “shake”— the most straightforward description of an earthquake's effect. I assumed that even those who have not experienced an earthquake could relate to the experience of shaking. I put a liquid ink spot on a white paper, set up the paper next to my garbage disposal, and turned it on. Over time, the pool of ink spread to fill the page and the shape of the spot grew into a more agitated state. I recorded the entire process with a video camera marking the time of the movement. When I went back to check the timestamps, the progression of the effect was obvious. In this study, the idea of “shake” became a metaphor of the earthquake. The apparent change caused by shaking indicates the essence of “shake,” allowing the audience to immerse themselves into the situation of being shaken.





I produced another study of the word “shake” by using a digital scanner. I created a version of the word using only vertical strokes. After printing the word out on a piece of paper, I shook the paper on the scanner while it was being scanned. The scanner recorded the motion of shaking and produced an unpredictable form of the typography. Since the type was made up of vertical lines, each line resulted in a fine distinction from the others, resulting in a landscape of uncertainty.



INGLOS

INGLES



As the floors of buildings collapse, no living being can find a place to hide.

To address the concept, “hide” I once again played around with the use of vertical lines. I decided to repeatedly print the word on paper by making it go through the printer several times. The printer slightly shifted the paper every time it passed through. The unregistered positions of the paper resulted in a compelling illustration of the idea of hiding. The topmost layer would cover the information underneath. Whenever something is hidden, however, other things are exposed. Accidents reveal many truths that are hidden in normal life. If there was not an earthquake, people in China would never have known how many of them — especially children—were living or studying in insecure, decrepit buildings. Nor would they realize the over-exploitations of nature implied by their lifestyle. An accident is a form of critique. The results of accidents can work to encourage people to express themselves politically and critically, and to further encourage the public to be more conscious of existing problems.

SPLIT

SPLIT

SPLIT

SPLIT

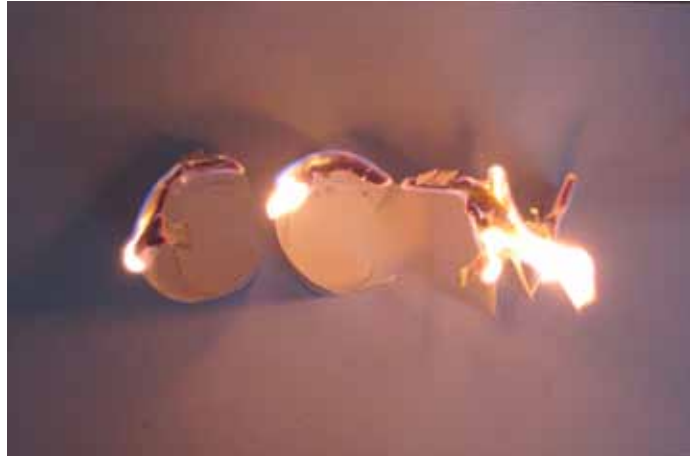
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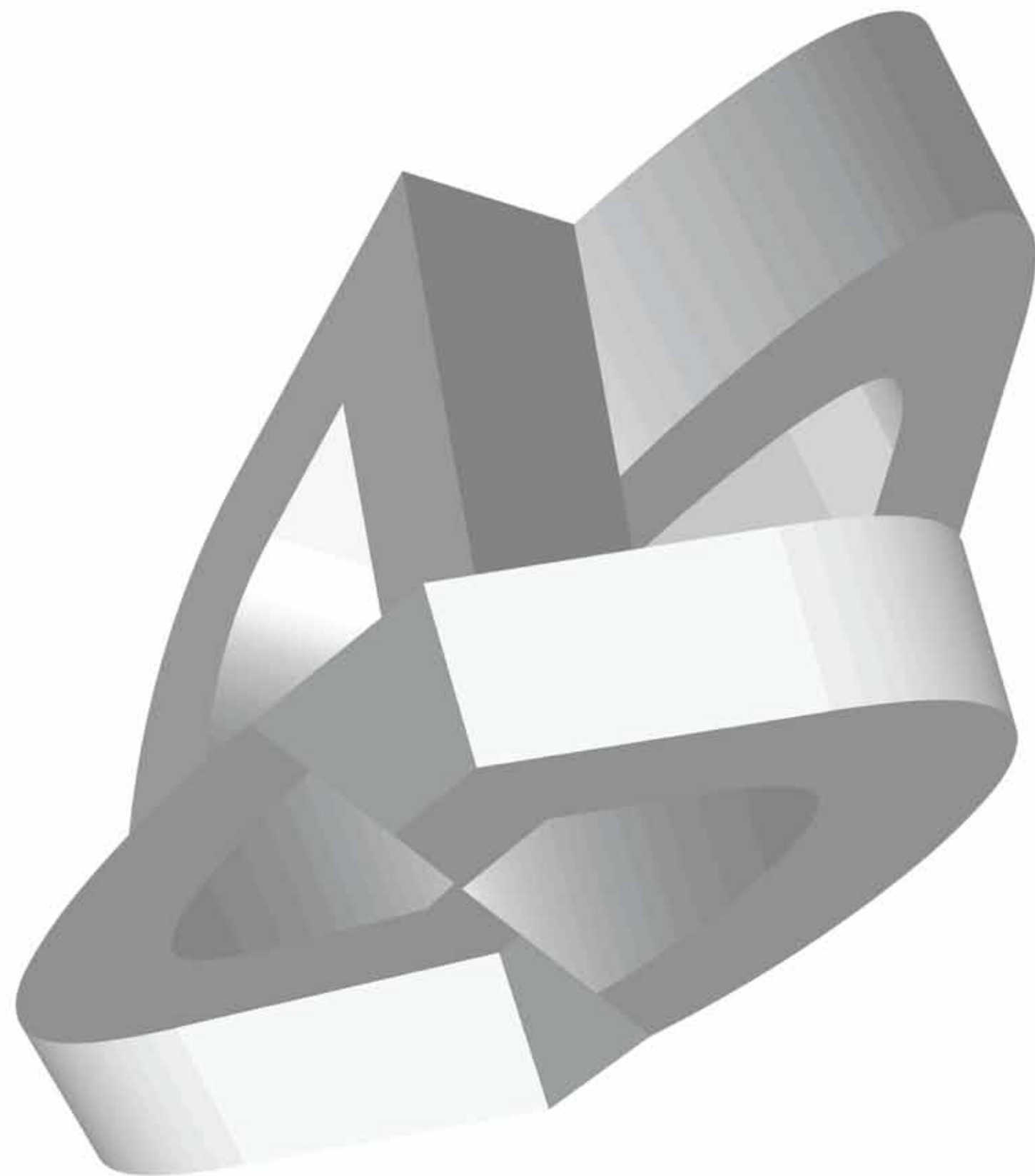
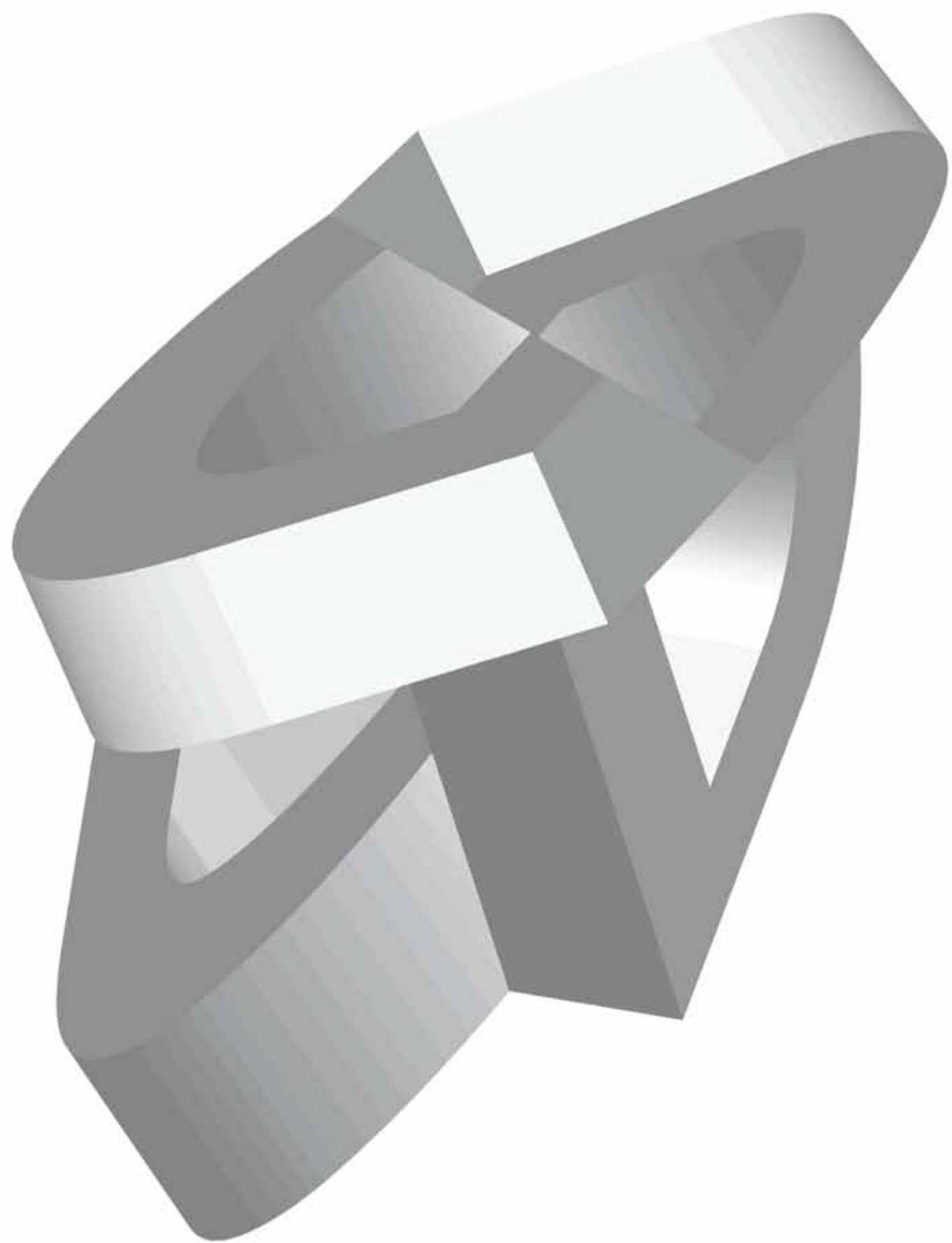
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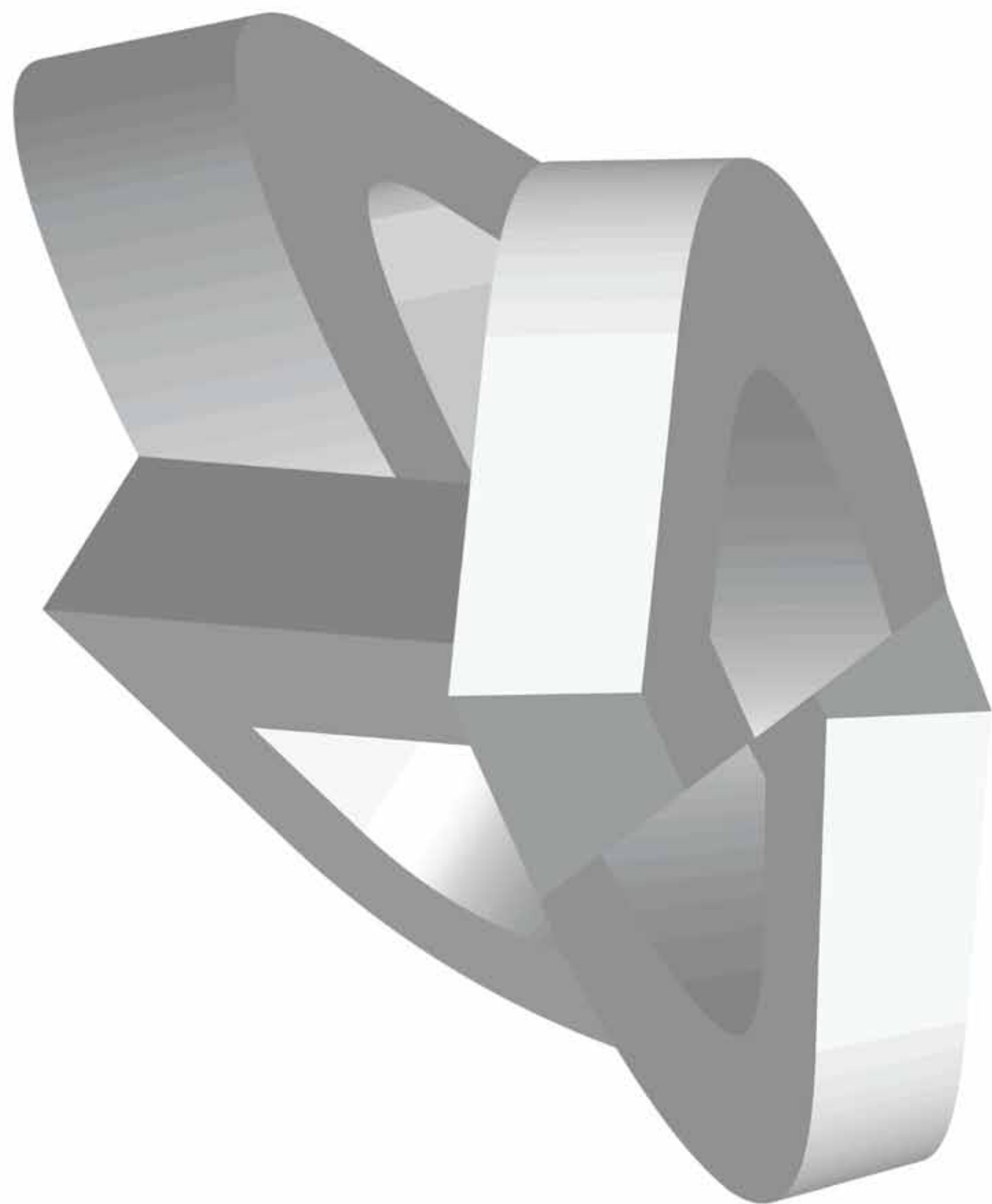
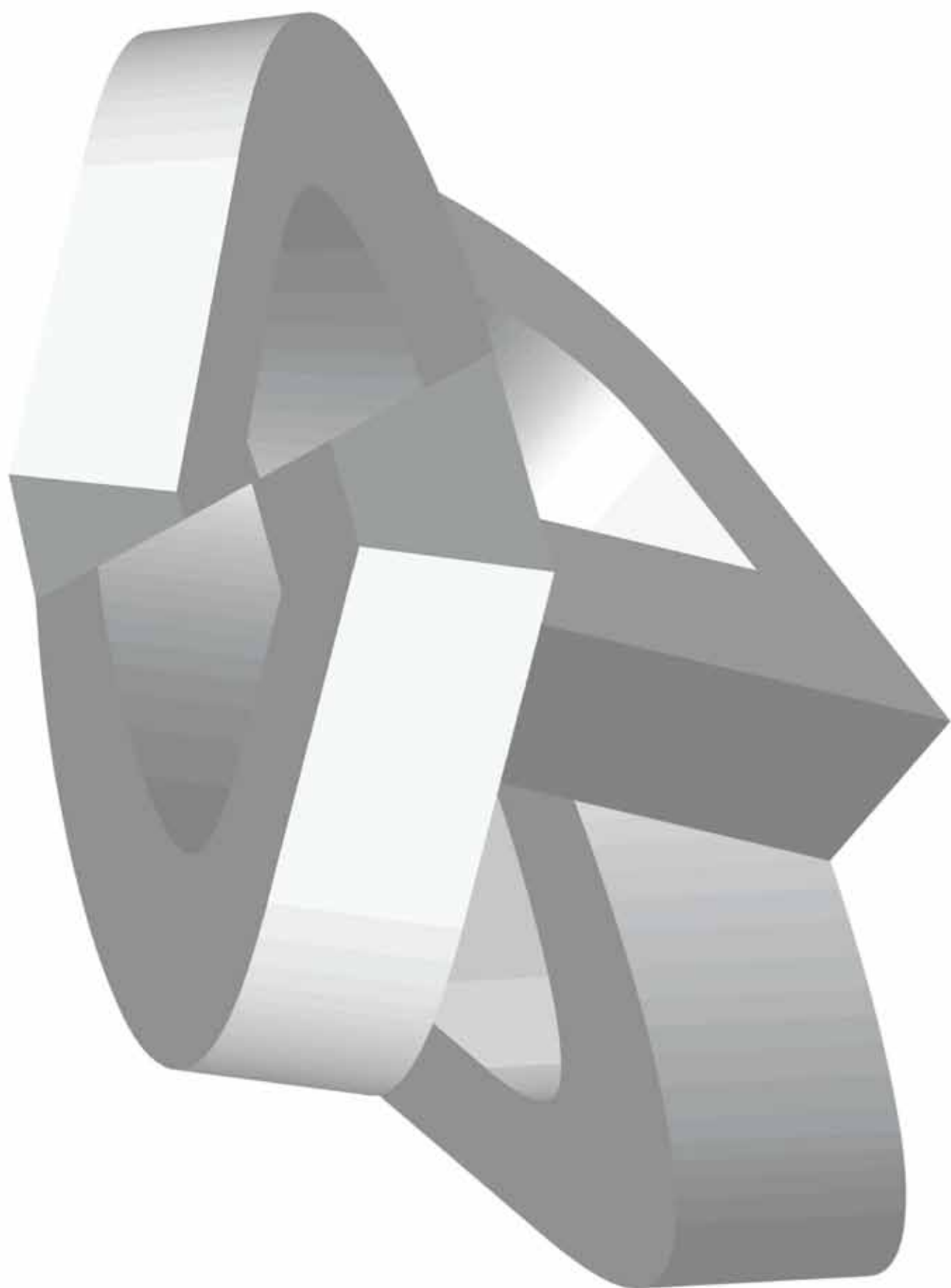
In addition to analyzing social problems that arise from encounters with accidents, I am also interested in addressing the problems and potentials that arise from our dependence on technology. One of the supposed benefits of technology is that it increases efficiency. But we rarely, if ever, take advantage of this idealized potential. The insufficiencies of technology are apparent everywhere, sometimes resulting in bodily harm or even death. Even so, technology continues to be addictive. It seems that people today are adapting willingly to being disturbed, dominated, and affronted by technology. Many seem unaware of the dangers of exchanging humanity with technology. Instead of trying to directly solve this problem, I recreate and manipulate technological faults — man-made accidents, having random patterns, shapes, colors, typefaces and forms — as my response to technology. I call attention to people's awareness of their relationship with technology as a way of opposing the unquestioning attitude regarding its benefits. The instruments, machines and devices from each period of technological revolution bring with them unique opportunities for "malfunction." These reveal the inherent identity of certain media and visualize the scope of scientific thought that contributed to their invention.



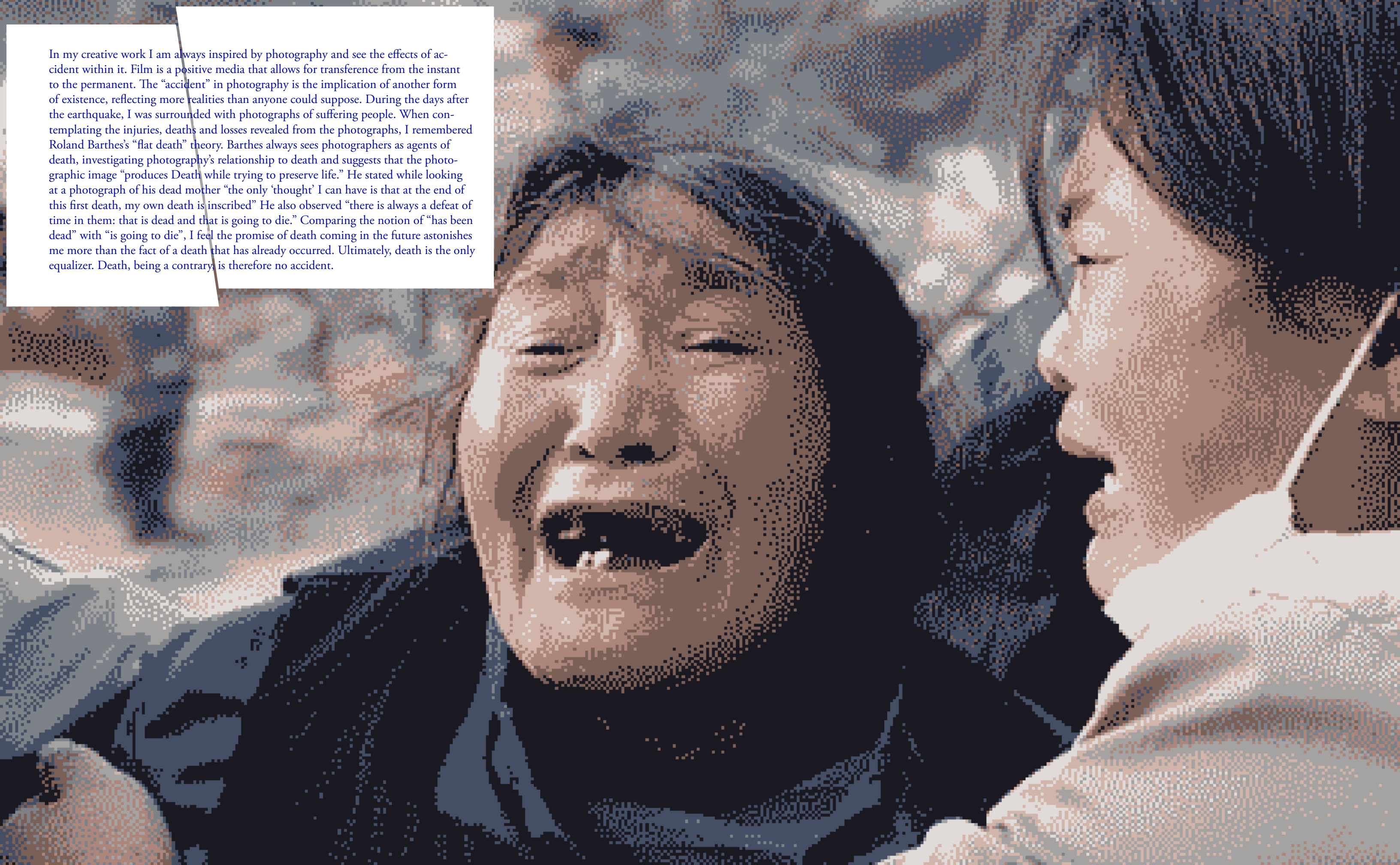
The work I make usually comes out in multiples. The aggregation of each step from the production process becomes an essential aspect of accidental design. Every piece can be addressed as a place on a timeline, affecting other components and even the entire plan. As a result, effects from each image radiate outward, break up original intent, and lead to unplanned outcomes. One issue that essentially affects an accidental system is timing. Seeing the timeline of the creative process as a chain, each spot on the timeline is a trigger for the others. The entire collection implies more possibilities for creating. The outcome from an accidental operation is not a closed one, but open and extendable. I am always curious what would happen if the operation were altered a little; what kind a result would occur?

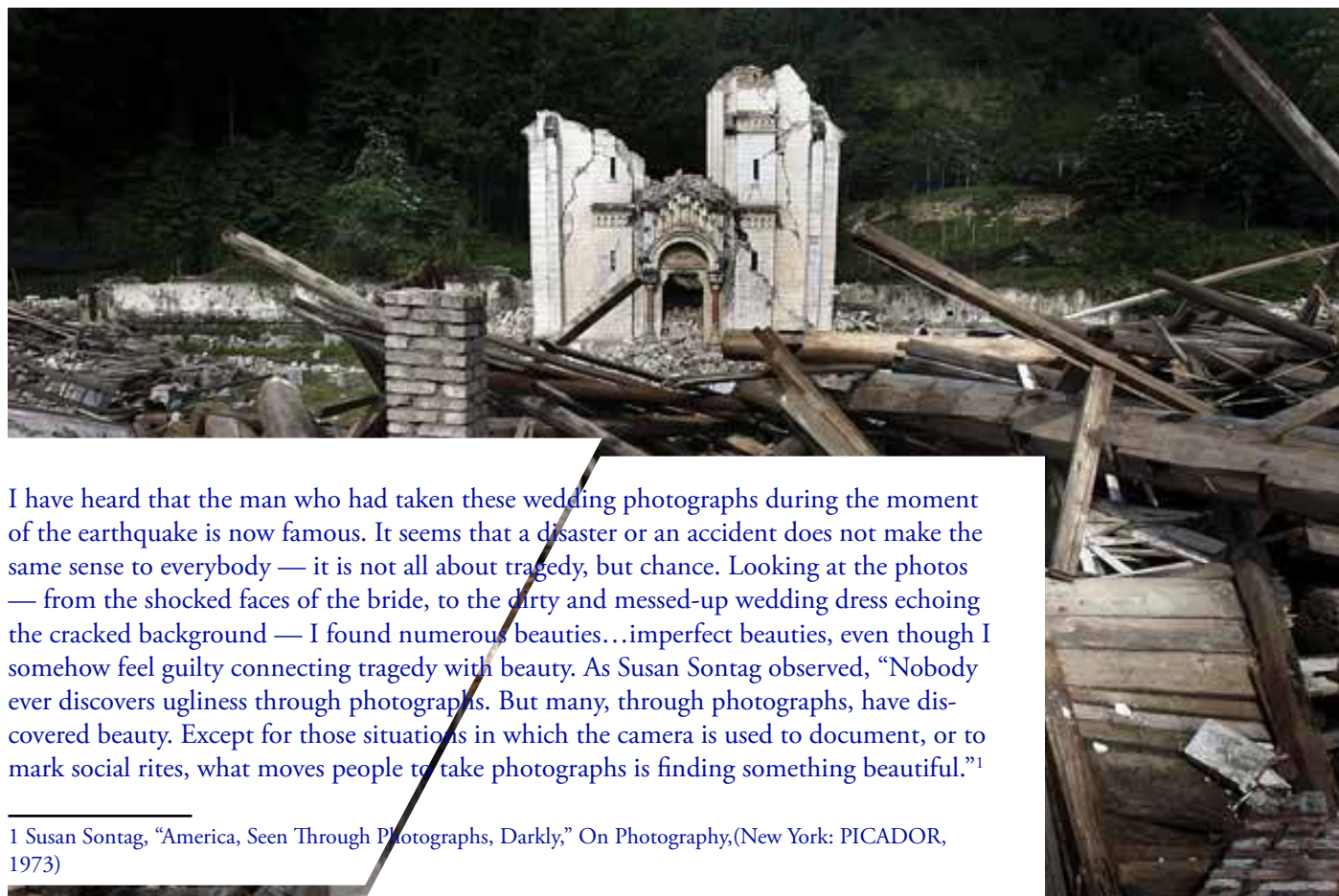






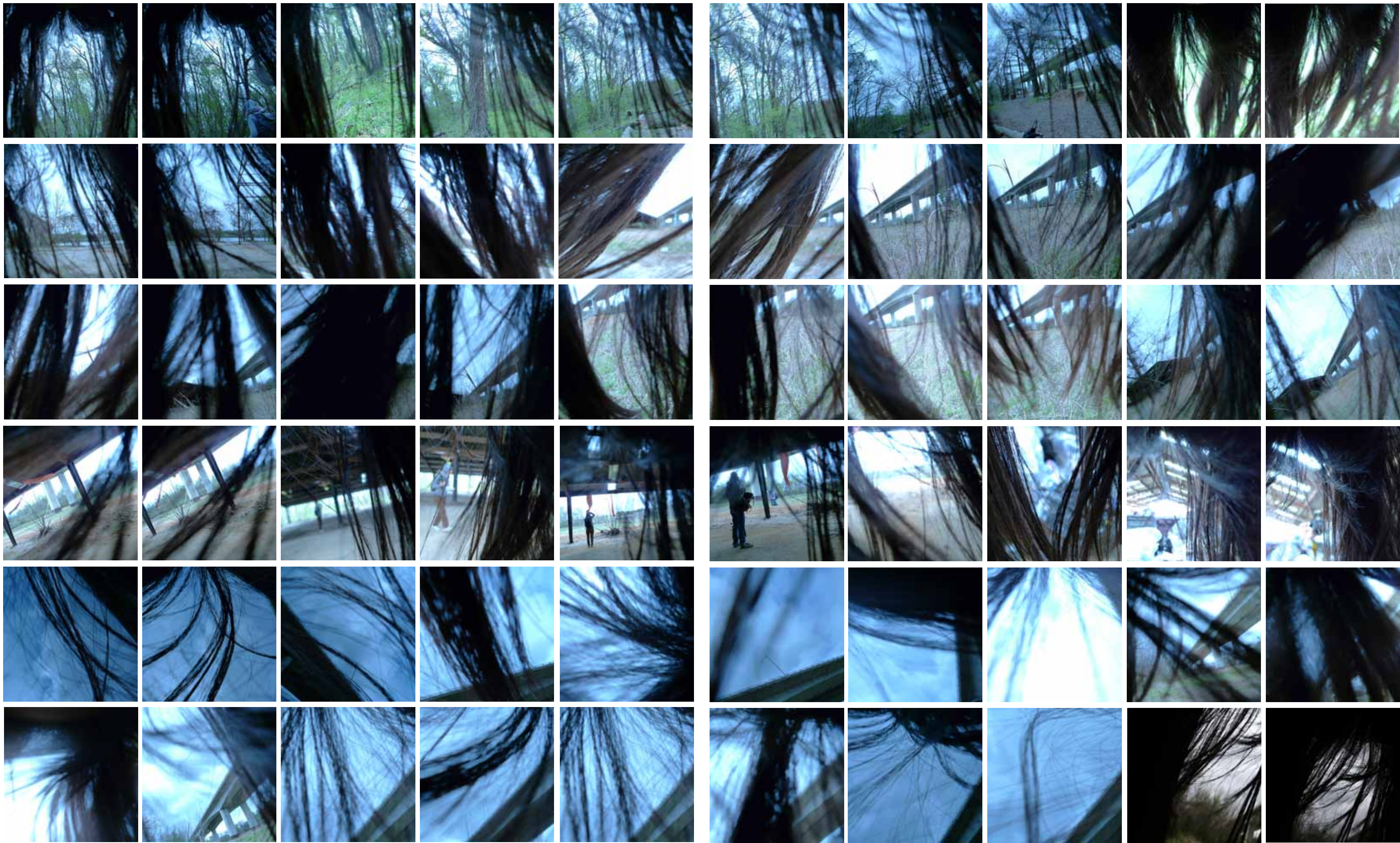
In my creative work I am always inspired by photography and see the effects of accident within it. Film is a positive media that allows for transference from the instant to the permanent. The “accident” in photography is the implication of another form of existence, reflecting more realities than anyone could suppose. During the days after the earthquake, I was surrounded with photographs of suffering people. When contemplating the injuries, deaths and losses revealed from the photographs, I remembered Roland Barthes’s “flat death” theory. Barthes always sees photographers as agents of death, investigating photography’s relationship to death and suggests that the photographic image “produces Death while trying to preserve life.” He stated while looking at a photograph of his dead mother “the only ‘thought’ I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed” He also observed “there is always a defeat of time in them: that is dead and that is going to die.” Comparing the notion of “has been dead” with “is going to die”, I feel the promise of death coming in the future astonishes me more than the fact of a death that has already occurred. Ultimately, death is the only equalizer. Death, being a contrary, is therefore no accident.



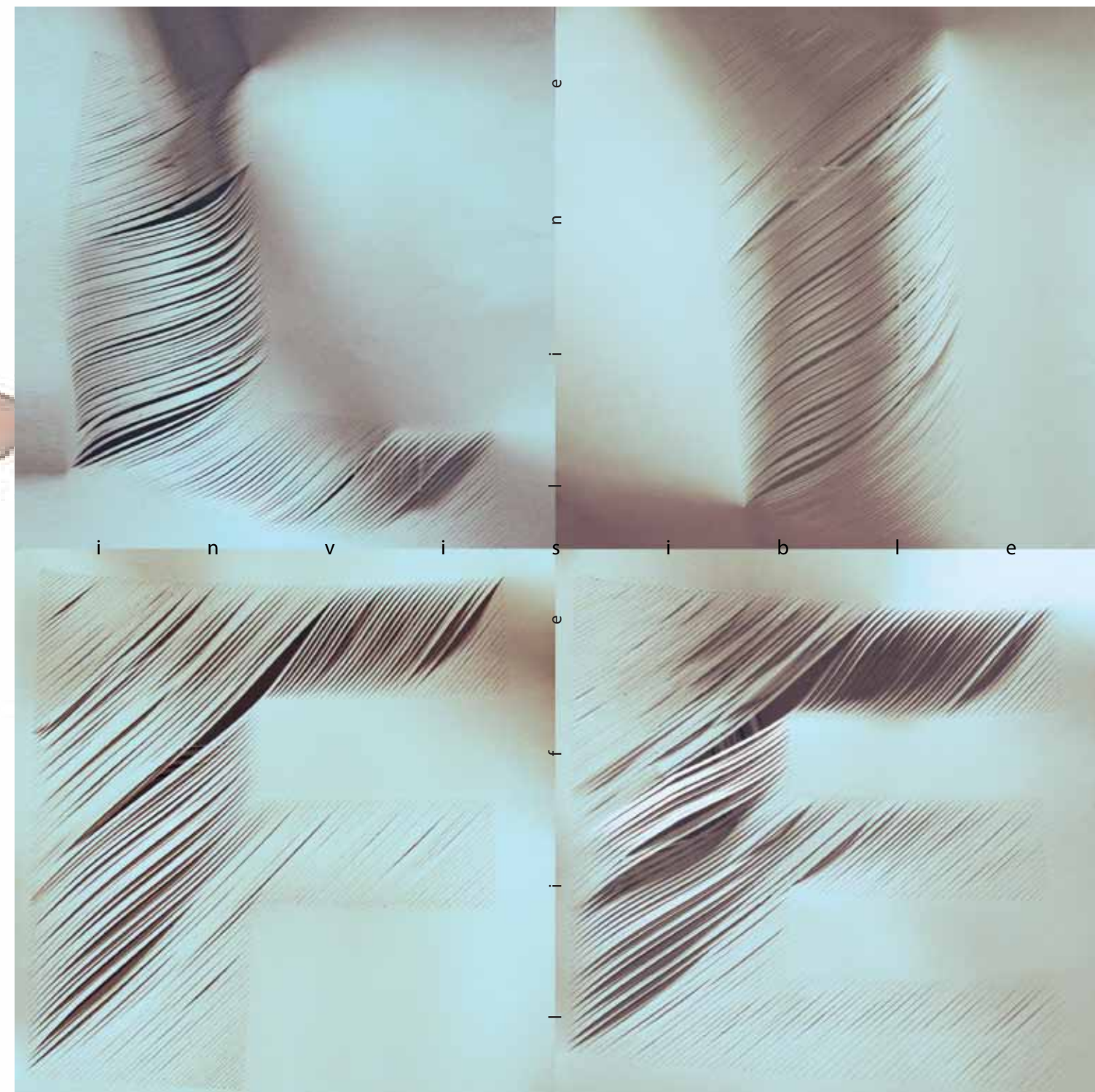


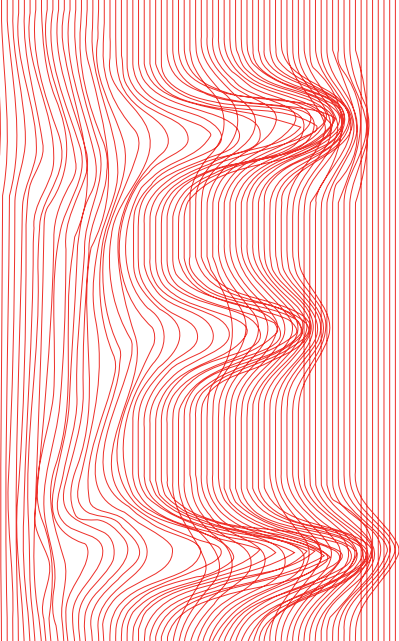
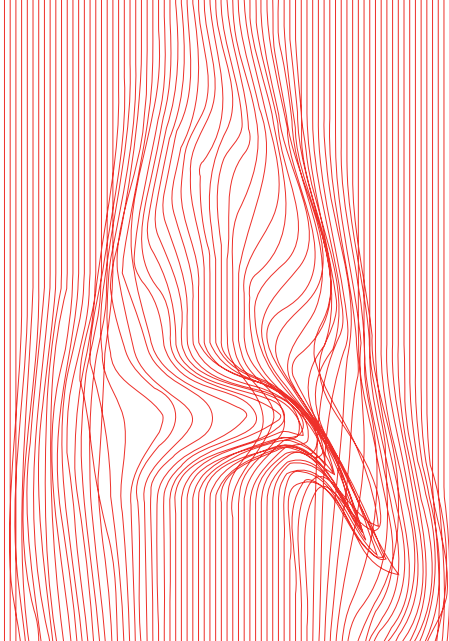
I have heard that the man who had taken these wedding photographs during the moment of the earthquake is now famous. It seems that a disaster or an accident does not make the same sense to everybody — it is not all about tragedy, but chance. Looking at the photos — from the shocked faces of the bride, to the dirty and messed-up wedding dress echoing the cracked background — I found numerous beauties...imperfect beauties, even though I somehow feel guilty connecting tragedy with beauty. As Susan Sontag observed, “Nobody ever discovers ugliness through photographs. But many, through photographs, have discovered beauty. Except for those situations in which the camera is used to document, or to mark social rites, what moves people to take photographs is finding something beautiful.”¹


¹ Susan Sontag, “America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly,” *On Photography*, (New York: PICADOR, 1973)



Where am I from
Where am I going to be
All is another accident







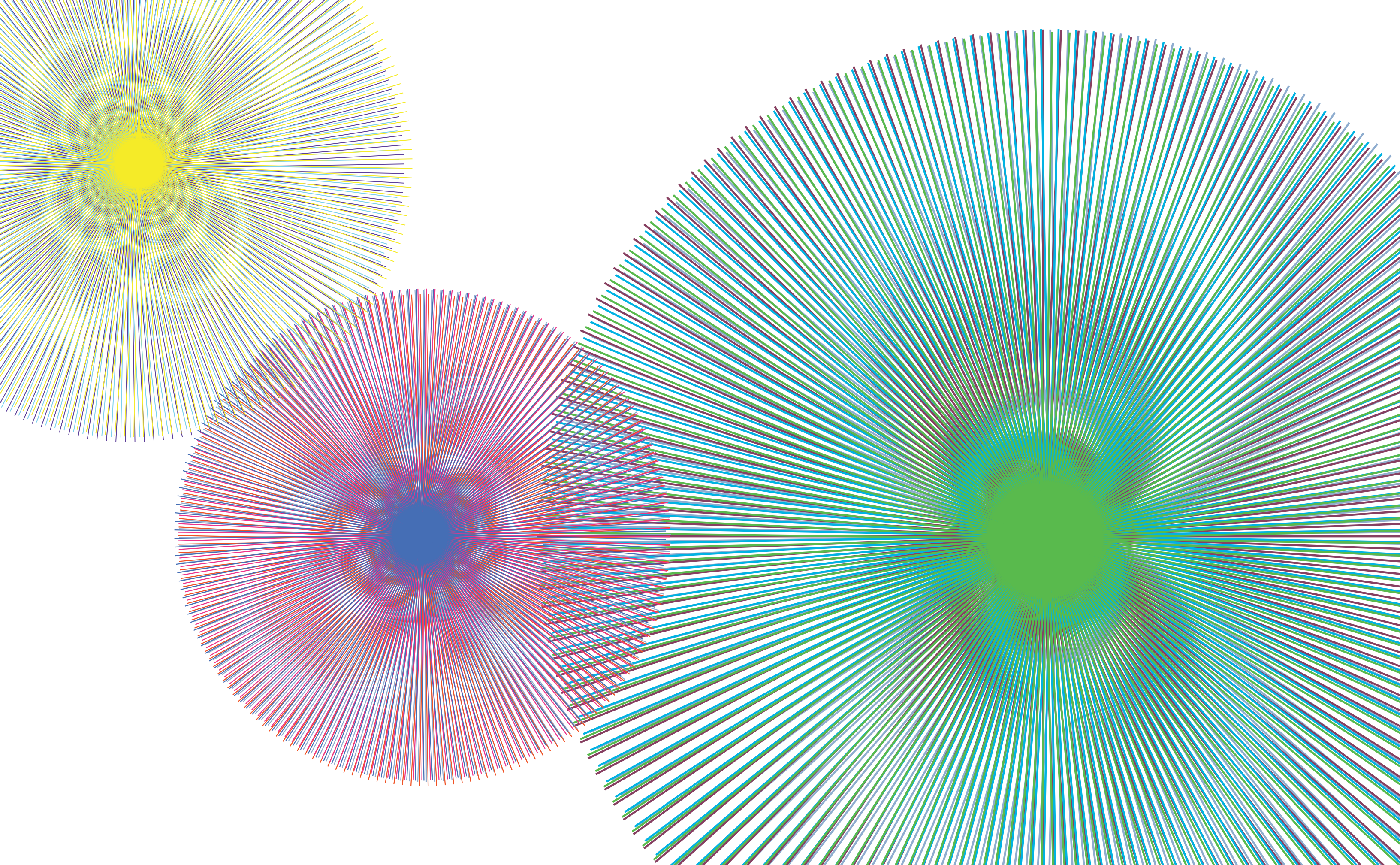
CHANGE

The change exists within unconsciousness.
Wake up! It could be happening to you.

A beauty reborn in dirt, mess, and misfortune is unpredictable, but imaginable

Almost against our will we are drawn to look at and contemplate the imperfections and irregularities that result from accidents; we are fascinated by the abnormality of such situations. This fascination is not something to be avoided, but reflects a new aesthetic region. An audience's latent desire becomes a positive resource to develop new operations and approaches to visual problem solving. For examples, I invited the accidental method into my "election-collection" workshop project (shown above). As an observation of 2009 presidential election, I created series of posters, communicating my criticism of the event. The accident method applied to the works allow formal accidents to become metaphors for the idea of political change.

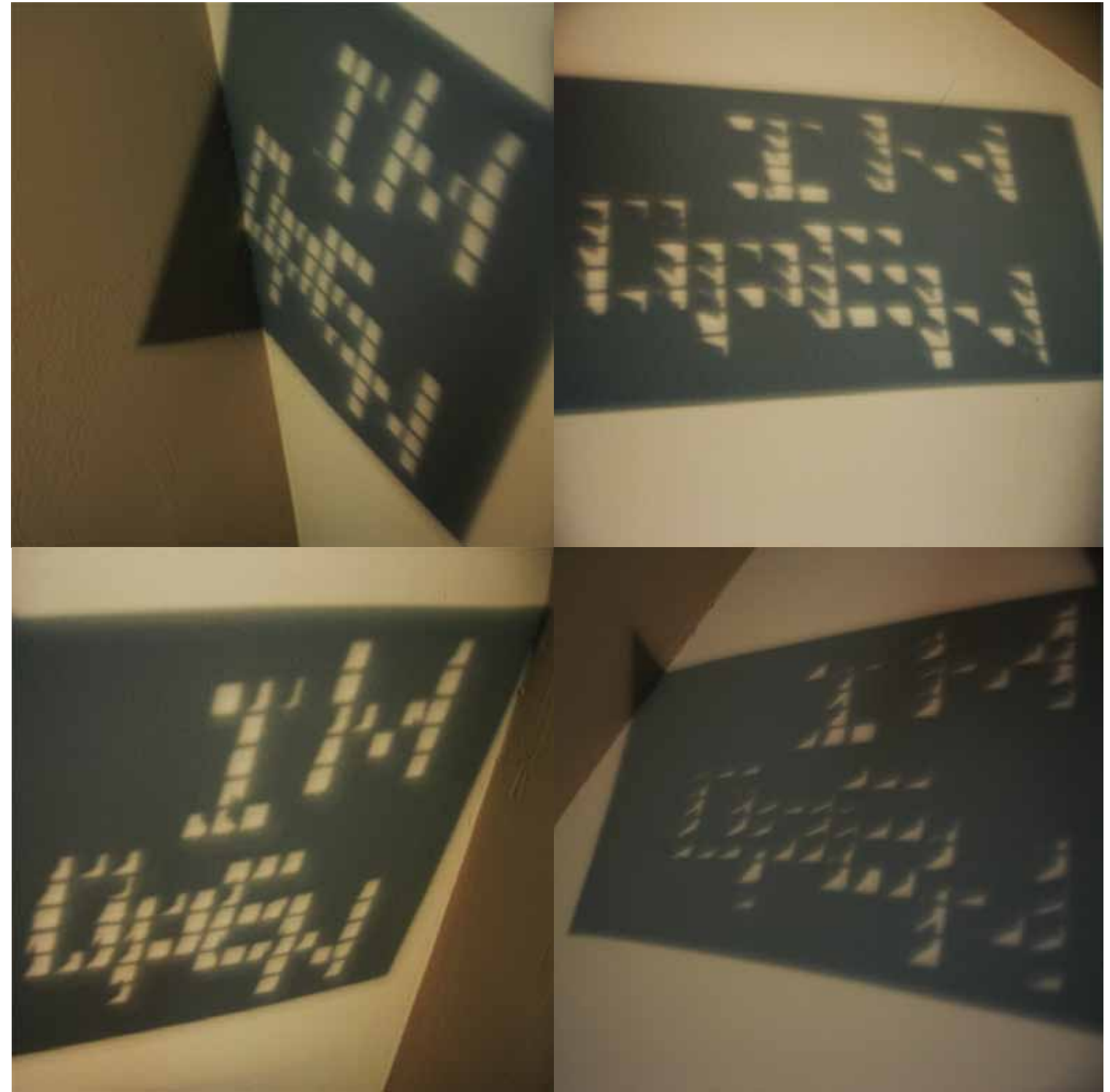


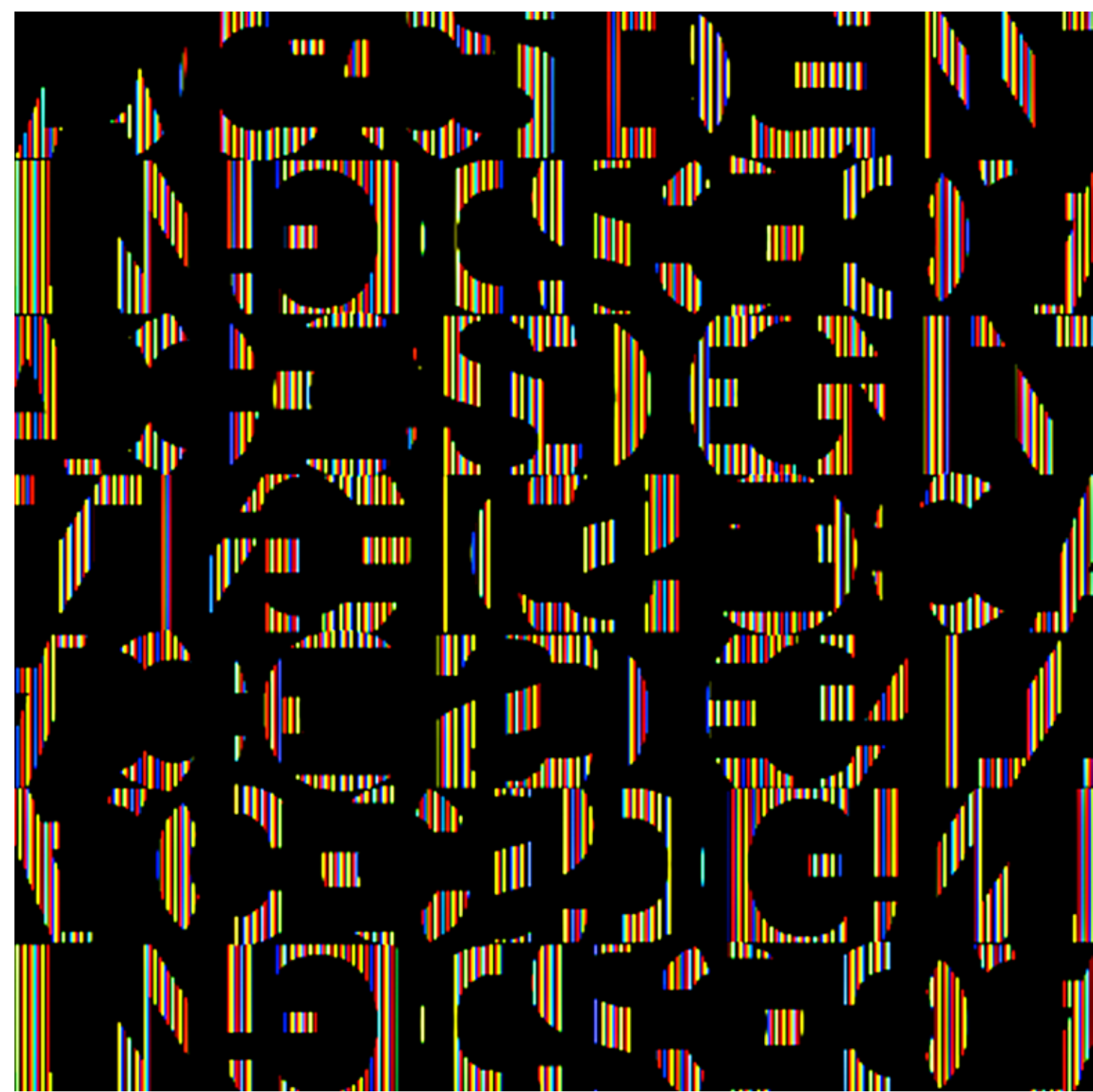
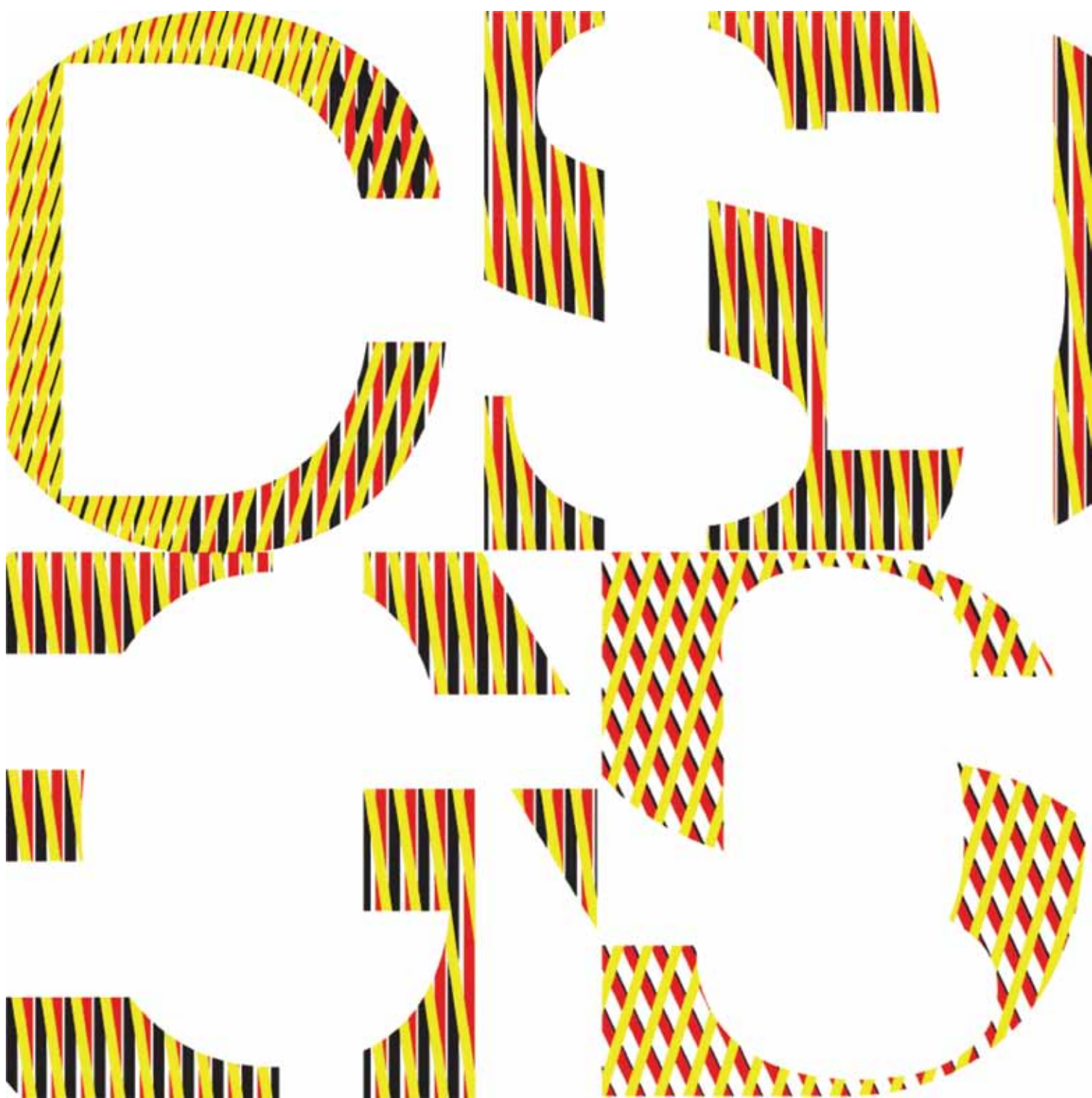


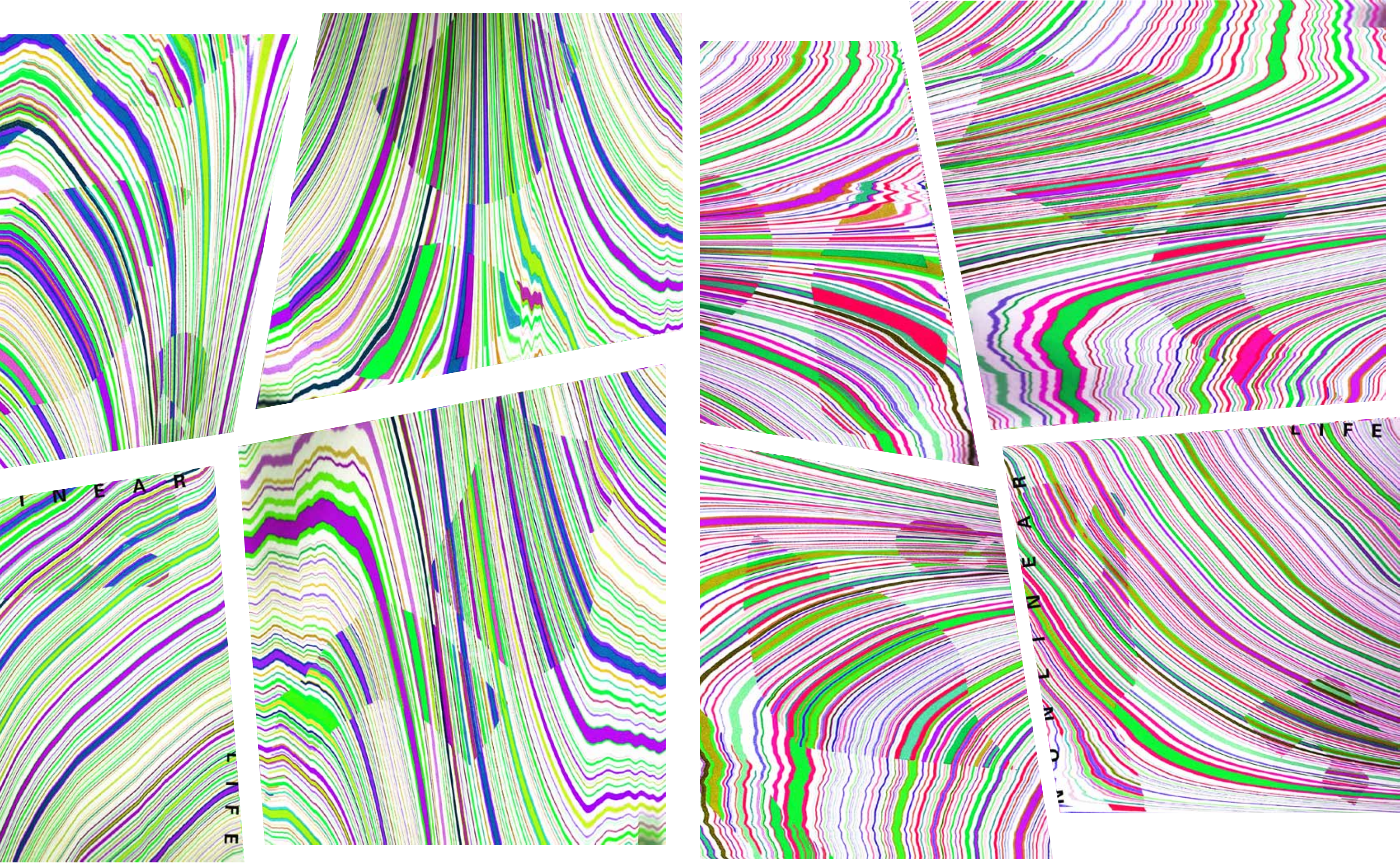
“I’m open”

It may be time for us to stop seeing accidents as events that are separate from the world. Instead of constantly dismissing them as interference with the positive structures of life, I have begun to look at them from the opposite perspective. In the creative process, failures and mistakes should never be meaningless, but mark the beginning of wisdom, and be helpful, useful and positive. I believe that the process of design is inevitably about opening ourselves up to the creative potentials. To intend an unintentional event is to construct a space, enable a process to run itself out and to end it at an unforeseen point.

In Chaos theory, it is stated that even though the behaviour of chaotic systems appears to be random, the dynamic system is essentially deterministic, meaning that its future dynamics are fully defined by initial conditions, with no random elements involved. An accident is defined from a concern for both history and the future. Being aware of the symmetry between substance and accident, I am more conscious of the current situation and the future status of human beings. The process of re-creation and rebirth triggers a chain of review, reconsideration, and revision. Also, it encourages us to take a critical perspective when we decide to restore situations brought into new form by accidents.





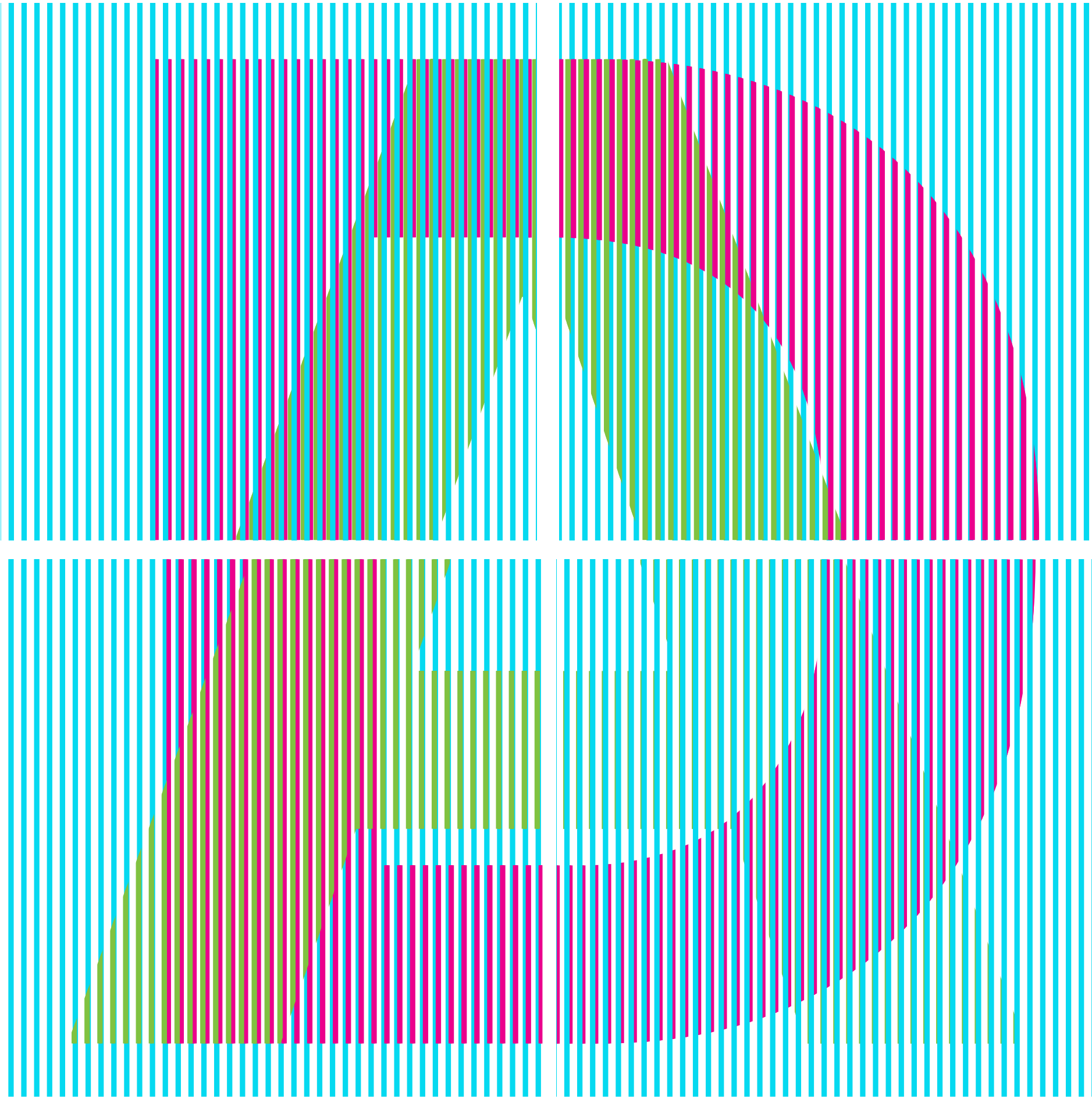


I N E A R

L I F E

W O W L I N E A R

L I F E



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A



ARTIST'S STATEMENT
The work is a series of four panels, each featuring abstract, reddish-pink brushstrokes on a light background. The strokes are horizontal and slightly curved, creating a sense of movement.



